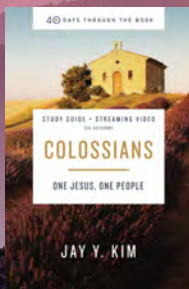
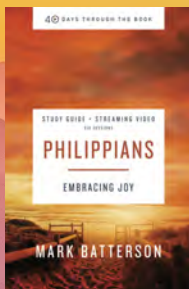


SAMPLER





40 DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO
SIX-SESSIONS

ROMANS

IN THE GRIP OF GRACE

MAX LUCADO

40 DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

SIX-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

ROMANS

IN THE GRIP OF GRACE

MAX LUCADO

WITH KEVIN & SHERRY HARNEY



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40 Days Through the Book: Romans Study Guide

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The themes of this study are drawn from the video study of the same name by Max Lucado. All other resources, including the session introductions, small group discussion questions, prayer direction, and the 40 Days learning and reflection exercises and have been written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with Max Lucado.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Welcome to the *40 Days Through the Book* study on Romans. During the course of the next six weeks, you and your fellow group members will embark on an in-depth exploration of Paul's message to the church in Rome. During this study, you will learn when Paul wrote the book, the audience for whom it was written, and the background and context in which it was written. But, more importantly, through the teaching by Max Lucado, you will explore the key themes that Paul relates in the book—and how his teachings relate to you today.

SESSION OUTLINE

The *40 Days Through the Book* video and study guide are designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or small group gathering. Each session begins with an introduction reading and question. You and your group will then watch the video message. There is an outline provided in the guide for you to take notes and gather your reflections as you watch the video. Next, you will engage in a time of directed discussion, review the memory verse for the week, and then close each session

with a time of prayer. (Note that if your group is larger, you may wish to watch the videos together and then break into smaller groups of four to six people, to ensure that everyone has time to participate in discussions.)

40-DAY JOURNEY

What is truly unique about this study, and the other studies in the *40 Days Through the Book* series, are the daily learning resources that will lead you into a deeper engagement with the text. Each week, you will be given a set of daily readings, with accompanying reflection questions, to help you explore the material that you covered during your group time.

The first day's reading will focus on the key verse to memorize for the week. In the other weekly readings, you will be invited to read a passage from the book of Romans, reflect on the text, and then respond with some guided journal questions. On the final day, you will review the key verse again and recite it from memory. As you work through the six weeks' worth of material in this section, you will read (and, in some cases, reread) the entire book of Romans.

Now, you may be wondering why you will be doing this over the course of *forty* days. Certainly, there is nothing special about that number. But there is something biblical about it. In the Bible, the number forty typically designates a time of *testing*. Noah was in the ark for forty days. Moses lived forty years in Egypt and another forty years in the desert before he led God's people. He spent forty days on Mount Sinai receiving God's laws and sent spies, for forty days, to investigate the land of Canaan. Later, God sent the prophet Jonah to warn

ancient Nineveh, for forty days, that its destruction would come because of the people's sins.

Even more critically, in the New Testament we read that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, fasting and praying. It marked a critical transition point in his ministry—the place where he set about to fulfill the mission that God had intended. During this time Jesus was tested relentlessly by the enemy . . . and prevailed. When he returned to Galilee, he was a different person than the man who had entered into the wilderness forty days before. The same will be true for you as you commit to this forty-day journey through Romans.

GROUP FACILITATION

You and your fellow group members should have your own copy of this study guide. Not only will this help you engage when your group is meeting, but it will also allow you to fully enter into the *40 Days* learning experience. Keep in mind the video, questions, and activities are simply tools to help you engage with the session. The real power and life-transformation will come as you dig into the Scriptures and seek to live out the truths you learn along the way.

Finally, you will need to appoint a leader or facilitator for the group who is responsible for starting the video teaching and for keeping track of time during discussions and activities. Leaders may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate. For more thorough instructions on this role, see the Leader's Guide included at the back of this guide.

INTRODUCTION

ROMANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome c. AD 57, almost three decades after the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the Church. It is fair to say that Rome was the “center” of the world in the days of Paul. The most famous poets, politicians, philosophers, and people came from Rome, moved to Rome, or longed to visit this influential city. Paul knew that if the gospel grew healthy roots in Rome, it could spread all over the world. If the church in Rome was gripped by the grace of God, it could influence and help believers far and wide.

THE BIG PICTURE

Some of Paul’s letters were written to dear friends, others to people he had mentored, and still others to churches that knew him well. The letter to the church in Rome was different. It was written to a group of believers who had not

met Paul and were actually a bit cautious about him. He was a controversial person they had heard about but did not know personally. Paul's hope was to visit the believers in Rome on his way to Spain. So, as a preamble to their meeting, Paul sent a letter that was inspired by the Holy Spirit and came from deep within his heart. Romans is one of the richest theological works ever penned, yet it is also deeply personal.

The first eleven chapters focus with laser precision on the core beliefs of the Christian faith. If a believer wants to dig into the central teaching of the Bible, almost all of the core doctrines can be found in the book of Romans. The theme of these chapters is correct belief, or what theologians would call *orthodoxy*. Paul is showing the Roman church that his beliefs were absolutely in line with the Scriptures and the teaching of Jesus.

Starting in chapter twelve, there is a shift. With one word, the focus moves from belief to action. When Paul declares "Therefore," in Romans 12:1, he turns the reader's attention to what scholars call *orthopraxy*, or right Christian living. Once we know what we believe, we can move into action and daily behavior that honors and glorifies God.

In this one letter, Paul shows the Roman church that his beliefs and practices are unquestionably in line with the truth they have been taught. He gives a Spirit-breathed clarification of what the gospel is and how Jesus' people are to think and live in the grip of God's amazing grace. Paul, with authentic clarity and deep transparency, thus goes from being a controversial stranger to the Romans to a brother and friend—before they ever meet him.

Paul's words to the Romans contained the power to save souls, shape minds, and transform lives for the glory of Jesus. The exciting thing is that reading this book of the Bible can

still do all of these things today! So brace yourself as you read this letter from Paul.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Romans that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **The reality, danger, and power of sin.** Sin is the deepest problem that human beings face and has eternal consequences (see Romans 1–2).
- **God’s grace is real, amazing, and available to all people.** Through Jesus, every person is invited to enter a relationship with the Father and be cleansed of their sin (see Romans 3–5).
- **God has broken our chains and set us free, but the battle with sin continues.** Our old way of life is dead and we are alive in Jesus, but the process of spiritual growth and becoming like Jesus takes a lifetime and demands continual surrender to the will and ways of God (see Romans 6–8).
- **God’s beautiful story comes in four movements: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.** We are part of a spiritual family tree that spans the Old and New Testaments in the Bible. God is engrafting us into a bigger story and family than we can imagine (see Romans 9–11).

- **Christians follow in the steps of their Savior.** This means that we walk the pathway of love. In a world driven by selfish ambition and self-centered demands, we humbly serve and sacrificially love others (see Romans 12–13).
- **Followers of Jesus are like passengers on a ship.** We are all on the same journey. We are part of an amazing family of faith, and God calls us to live in fellowship with each other (see Romans 14–16).

In the first eleven chapters of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul lays out the core beliefs of the Christian faith with clarity and precision. Then, in the final five chapters, Paul reveals how to live in ways consistent with those beliefs. So, as you start this journey, ask God to help you *understand* your faith at a deeper level than you ever have before, and then pray for the courage and strength to *live out* what you learn in your daily life. In addition, ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand God's grace, walk in that grace, and share it freely with every person you meet.

▶ SESSION 1

THE PROBLEM WE FACE

ROMANS 1–2

There is a problem that every human being faces called sin. It leads to consequences that are bigger than we realize. Try as we might, we can't solve this problem on our own. Thankfully, God has a solution, and he desires to deal with our sin.

WELCOME

When you look at the top-grossing movies of all time, there is one fascinating common trait that stands out: *heroes!* From the *Star Wars* movies to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy to the *Avengers* franchise, about 60 percent of the top movies are stories of heroes. Even *The Ten Commandments*, which was made in 1956, shows up in the top ten-grossing movies of all time and presents Moses as a type of hero—and God as the ultimate hero.

All of this raises the question as to why we people are so drawn to heroes. But before we can answer that question, we first have to consider what a hero is. One simple definition is, “A person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.” In movies, these characters tend to do things that are far and above what “ordinary” people could or would choose to do. A war hero rushes back into battle to drag injured soldiers out of harm’s way. A superhero flies in to save the day, or summons sea creatures to do their bidding, or throws a massive hammer that returns to their hand after defeating their enemies.

We are drawn to heroes because they have the courage, noble qualities, and power to change the world that we desire for our own lives. We admire these traits because they are rare in this world today. In fact, most of us would likely say we have never met a true hero.

Or have we?

If a hero is truly someone who lives with courage, achieves great things, and does that which is noble, then maybe we have met more heroes than we have recognized. When a person loves Jesus and follows his will, he or she might just qualify as a hero. Maybe your prayer-warrior grandmother was a hero. Maybe that faithful Sunday school teacher who opened the Bible and shared with middle school kids for three decades was a hero. Perhaps ordinary people who dare to follow God and obey his Word can become heroes.

Movies are nice, but what we need to see in this life are *real* people who live heroically as they follow Jesus, the ultimate hero. As we begin our forty-day journey through the book of Romans, we meet such a hero in the apostle Paul. His devotion to Jesus, his boldness to speak (and write) the

truth, and his understanding of God's grace all serve as examples that we can seek to follow as we walk through the book of Romans.

SHARE

Think about the definition of a hero as being someone who has lived courageously with outstanding achievements and noble qualities. Who is someone you know who has lived such a heroic life? What is it about this person that makes them a hero in your eyes?

WATCH

Play the video for session one. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts, questions, or key points that stand out to you.

Paul, an unusual but true hero (Romans 1:1–2)

Setting the scene: a prelude to a visit from Paul

SESSION 1

A clear presentation of Christian doctrine from an unlikely source

The bad news first: the reality of sin and wrath (Romans 1:18–20)

How do we respond to sin?

Hedonism: pretending God does not exist (Romans 1:18–23)

Judgmentalism: ignoring our sinfulness and condemning others (Romans 2:1–3)

THE PROBLEM WE FACE

Legalism: trying to use religion to earn our way to God
(Romans 2:17–29)

The bottom line: *grace!*

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Max's teaching on Romans 1–2?

2. Paul was profoundly aware of his sins and broken past. Why is awareness of our need for grace so critical if we are going to have sound biblical beliefs (theology)?

3. Max described the suit of good deeds and religious works he wore for many years. How would you describe a garment of self-righteousness you wore before you came to really understand the good news of the grace of Jesus?

4. **Read Romans 1:21–32.** What are some of the consequences that a person faces who lives as a hedonist (as if God does not exist)?

- 5. Read Romans 2:1–4.** What are signs or indicators that we are focusing on the sins of others while ignoring our own failings? Why is this so dangerous?
- 6. Read Romans 2:17–24.** If we compare ourselves to people who are living deep in sin and are rebellious toward God, how can this bolster a false sense of self-righteousness? If we compare ourselves to Jesus, what does this do to our arrogance and self-reliance?

MEMORIZE

In each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verse is from Romans 1:16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Have everyone recite this verse out loud. Then go around the room again and have everyone try to say the verse completely from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is a practical next step you can take that will move you toward fully embracing the grace of Jesus rather than being hedonistic, judgmental, or legalistic? Take a few moments to write down your thoughts.

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have pursued your own hedonistic desires and forgotten to surrender to God's will for your life.
- Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to help you stop judging others and look honestly at the need for repentance in your own heart and life.
- Pray for freedom from legalism and for deep understanding of God's grace in your life.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin with a day to preview the biblical theme from the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Romans, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will review the epic theme of the session, reflect on what you have learned, and review how it has impacted your life.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Romans 1:16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Now try to say the verse completely from memory.

Reflect: What does this tell you about the power of the gospel in your life?

DAY 2

Read: Romans 1:1–17.

Reflect: Among other things, the book of Romans is an introduction of the apostle Paul to the Christians in the city of Rome. If all you knew about Paul was found in these opening seventeen verses of the letter, what would you learn about his heart, relationship to Jesus, and care for God's church? Think about how you would picture Paul after reading these words.

Journal:

- As you read Romans 1:16–17, what do you learn about the gospel?

- Our faith is central to the gospel. What do you learn about the place of faith in this passage? How is your faith growing (if indeed it is)?

Pray: Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to help you live by faith every moment of the day.

DAY 3

Read: Romans 1:18–32.

Reflect: As you read Romans 1:18–32, notice the recurring line in verses 24, 26, and 28: “God gave them over.” It paints a picture of a downward spiral deeper and deeper into sin. What does this spiral look like in our world? In your own life?

Journal:

- Why do you think God, who loves us and wants us to be gripped by his grace, would give us over to our sin and allow us to keep running from him?

- What can you do to break the pattern of this downward spiral in your own life?

Pray: Confess where you see yourself running into sin and resisting God. Ask for power to turn back to God.

DAY 4

Read: Romans 2:1–16.

Reflect: We are all tempted to wear the judge's robe and spend too much time focusing on the sins and problems of other people. Think about your attitude toward others. What are some ways you can identify that you sit as "judge and jury"?

Journal:

- Why is God opposed to you and me sitting as the judge over other people?

- What are two or three ways that you tend to have a judgmental attitude?

Pray: Ask for forgiveness for any judgmental attitudes and actions and pray for eyes to see others the way God does.

DAY 5

Read: Romans 2:17–29.

Reflect: In the days of the apostle Paul, there were many people who lived with spiritual pride, religious arrogance, and bloated egos. The temptation to be a legalist and glory in our own “super spirituality” still exists today. Think back over the past week and take note of times that your attitudes, actions, or words were legalistic. What can you do to show more grace and respond with a less legalistic attitude toward others?

Journal:

- What were some of the legalistic and spiritually arrogant attitudes in the lives of the people to whom Paul was writing?
- What are some of the patterns of religious pride and legalism that can capture the heart of a Christian today? Reflect on your own life to make sure you are not exhibiting any of these patterns.

Pray: Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where legalism or religious arrogance has crept into your heart.

DAY 6

Read: Romans 2:21–32.

Reflect: We are messed up because of sin, and God wants to make us whole and healthy. This is the epic theme of these opening chapters of Romans. If we miss the truth that sin is more prevalent and dangerous than we think, we have not

read this passage closely enough. If we begin to see the greatness of God's grace and willingness to deal with our sin, we are starting to get the big message. What is one step you can take in your own life to stop the downward spiral of sin pictured in this passage?

Journal:

- How do these chapters in Romans open your eyes to the reality of sin and the vastness of God's grace?
- Write a brief prayer of thanks for the gift of grace God has lavished on you.

Pray: Thank God that sin does not have the final word, but that his grace is greater than all our sins.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Romans 1:16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Now try to say the verse completely from memory.

Reflect: What does God's gift of salvation mean to you personally?

An aerial photograph of a beach. The top half of the image shows the dark, textured surface of the ocean. The bottom half shows the sandy beach with white foam from the waves washing onto the shore. The waves are breaking in a way that creates a jagged, organic line between the water and the sand.

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SIX SESSIONS

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INTRODUCTION

MARK

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

John Mark was not one of the original disciples of Jesus. His name first appears in the book of Acts, after Peter miraculously escaped from prison and made his way to a home that belonged to John Mark's mother (see Acts 12:12). From there, the young man became a traveling companion of Paul and Barnabas, until he deserted them in Pamphylia, causing a rift between the two men (see 12:25; 13:13; 15:39). John Mark went on to travel with Barnabas, but scholars believe he maintained a close association with Peter, from whom he learned about the Savior. John Mark penned his fast-paced Gospel just a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in the early AD 60s, to believers in Rome and around the Roman world. This was a time of severe persecution, and his Gospel brought hope to those who were feeling discouraged. It also gave clarity for anyone who wondered what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

THE BIG PICTURE

While the three other Gospel writers—Matthew, Luke, and John—focused on details of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, Mark gets right to the heart of the matter. A few decades had passed since Jesus’ ministry, and some people were growing a bit fuzzy about what it meant to be a follower of the Messiah. Persecution of Christians was intensifying, and there was a temptation among the believers to compromise, apologize, or simply give up on their faith. Sadly, some were doing exactly that!

So, Mark needed to take the early Christians back to the basics. With clarity and precise language, he pulls no punches as he explains exactly what it means to be a follower of Christ. As we read his words, we discover an invitation to ask: *Who is this Jesus? What does he expect of me? Is suffering a normal part of the Christian life? What will encourage and strengthen my trust in Jesus?* These are questions that all who put their faith in Jesus—at some point in their lives—will ask themselves, maybe again and again. These questions are not born of a lack of faith but serve to strengthen and stabilize our relationship with the Savior.

As we read John Mark’s rapid-fire account of the ministry of Jesus, we find answers to these questions . . . and many others. When we embrace these biblical answers, our faith will solidify, our hope will deepen, and our pathway forward will grow clear. We will find that God’s strength fills us as Jesus draws near. So lace up your running shoes. Open your heart and mind. And come with your questions! Get ready to move as Mark’s Gospel reveals what it means to follow Jesus. Your life will never be the same.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Romans that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **Jesus has been given all authority.** This authority was clear for everyone to see. Jesus had power over the natural world, spiritual forces, sickness, and even death. As people encountered the Savior and recognized this, they were either drawn to him or resisted him (see Mark 1–3).
- **Jesus calls us and sends us out.** There were many people who flooded to Jesus and were drawn to his ministry. But out of the many, Jesus called twelve men to be with him and to go out with his message to the world. Jesus calls people near to him, and then he sends them out (see Mark 3–6).
- **Jesus was always willing to reveal God’s truth.** Even those who walked closest to Jesus and witnessed his power, ministry, and character did not fully understand who he was or what he expected of them. Although many others seemed to be deaf to the truth of God and blind to who he was, Jesus was always ready to open ears and give sight to the blind (see Mark 6–8).
- **Jesus redefined greatness.** Jesus told his followers that he would suffer and die. He also declared on multiple occasions that after he died, he would rise

from the grave. He wanted his followers to understand that humble service was the path of discipleship. Greatness is found in following him and walking the path of sacrifice (see Mark 8–10).

- **Jesus is the King of heaven and ruler of an eternal kingdom.** Near the end of Jesus' life, as he came to Jerusalem, he presented himself as the King. The crowds celebrated this declaration, but the religious leaders challenged his authority at every turn and eventually had him put to death (see Mark 11–13).
- **Jesus rose from the grave.** Jesus, the servant King, was arrested, mocked, abused, tried, crucified, and executed on a cross. He was placed in a tomb and was dead for three days. But then he rose again in glory, power, and eternal authority over hell, death, and the grave. Jesus is still the King of all kings and rules today and for eternity (see Mark 14–16).

Those who prefer a slow and ambling journey through the life of Jesus that fills in every blank and has a flourish on every sentence will struggle with Mark's Gospel. But those who love to get to the point, who prefer direct communication, and who appreciate it when others tell it like it is, will delight in Mark's approach. So, as you start this journey, take a deep breath, say a prayer, and get ready to move at the rapid pace of Mark's Gospel.

▶ SESSION 1

THE INVITATION

MARK 1:1–3:6

In the opening chapters of Mark, we see the meteoric rise of Jesus. We then witness conflict when the religious leaders decide they do not like what Jesus is teaching and how the crowds are drawn to him. Jesus is helping the people of his day understand who he is and what he expects of those who make the decision to follow him.

WELCOME

When expectations are crystal clear, everyone benefits. Just consider the workplace. Employers who give their new employees a written job description with detailed responsibilities and expectations avoid all kinds of future problems. Just imagine a boss telling a brand-new employee, “We don’t have job descriptions or specific responsibilities for our employees. We just hope you figure things out as you go!” It would be a recipe for disaster.

Likewise, couples repeat vows at their wedding ceremony to set up clear expectations. The couple vows to stick together and love each other “in sickness and in health, for better and for worse,” for as long as they both shall live. We have all heard these words at weddings. Why do they matter? Because any significant commitment involves setting up clear expectations and declarations of how the parties will conduct themselves.

In our modern world, we often end up skimming over words of commitment and rashly clicking the approve button. Just think about those agreements or contracts that pop up on a computer or tablet. When was the last time you actually *read* every word in these agreements? Most of us just scroll to the end and click “agree” without a second thought.

In the Gospel of Mark, we find that Jesus gave us clear expectations about *who he was* and *what he expects of us*. When it comes to following Jesus, we are wise to slow down and read the fine print. There is nothing better than being a disciple of Jesus, but there is also nothing that will call us to greater commitment and sacrifice.

So, as you begin this study, pay close attention to the words of this powerful biography of Jesus. It will reveal who Jesus is with staggering precision. It will also show who you are to be and what is expected if you are going to bear his name and accept the call to follow him.

SHARE

Think about when you first made the decision to follow Jesus. What did you think was expected of a Christian? How has your understanding changed and matured over time?

WATCH

Play the video for session one. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts, questions, or key points that stand out to you.

Background information on Mark's Gospel

Two key questions in the Gospel of Mark:

Who is Jesus?

What does he want?

John the Baptist prepares the way (Mark 1:2–8)

Jesus is introduced (Mark 1:9–13)

SESSION 1

Calling the first disciples—a mission of “kingdom expansion”
(Mark 1:16–20)

Jesus’ growing popularity (Mark 1:21–45)

Growing tensions with the religious establishment:

Conflict over **forgiveness of sins** (Mark 2:1–12)

Conflict over **friendships** (Mark 2:13–17)

Conflict over **fasting** (Mark 2:18–22)

Conflict over **working on the Sabbath** (Mark 2:23–28)

Conflict over healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6)

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Jeff's teaching on Mark 1:1–3:6?
2. **Read Mark 1:2–3, 7–8, 10–11, 24, and 27.** What do you learn about who Jesus is as you read these passages from a variety of different perspectives? How would you respond if a non-believing friend asked you, "Who is Jesus?"
3. **Read Mark 1:16–20.** When did you first accept the invitation to follow Jesus? How have you tried to live out the expectations that Jesus lays out in this passage?

4. The people of Jesus' day were amazed at his authority. In the opening chapter of Mark, we read how Jesus had power over demonic forces (see 1:21–28), illnesses (see verses 29–34), and relationships between people (see verses 40–45). How have you seen Jesus set a person free from the influence of sin? How have you seen Jesus bring healing into a person's life? How have you seen Jesus heal a broken relationship?
5. **Read Mark 2:1–12.** Why were the religious leaders so upset that Jesus declared this man to be forgiven of his sins? Why does Jesus have the authority to forgive sins?
6. **Read Mark 2:13–17.** In the first century, a Rabbi would never have been seen sharing intimate table fellowship with tax collectors and "sinners." What do you learn about Jesus as you read this passage? What are some ways you can follow his example when it comes to helping broken and lost people encounter the love and grace of God?

MEMORIZE

Each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verses are from Mark 1:16–17:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Have everyone recite these verses out loud. Then go around the room again and have everyone try to say them completely from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is a practical next step you can take in the coming week as you seek to understand Jesus’ expectations of his disciples?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you learn more about who Jesus is as you walk through the Gospel of Mark together during the coming sessions.
- Ask Jesus to fill you with power to live in ways that fulfill his desires and expectations of his disciples.
- Praise Jesus for his amazing authority over all things and ask him to unleash that power in your life, home, church, and community.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verses to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Mark, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will again review the key verses and reflect on what you have learned for the week.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Mark 1:16–17:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

Reflect: John Mark tells a story of *good news* from the beginning to the end of his Gospel. Jesus, the Savior, has come. He is God's beloved Son, and his kingdom is breaking into human history. Whether you are a new believer or a long-time follower of Christ, what good news have you experienced because of your relationship with the Lord? How do you express your thankfulness that God has brought this good news?

DAY 2

Read: Mark 1:1–15.

Reflect: This section of Mark begins and ends with the words “good news.” Mark starts by telling the world that the “good news” begins with Jesus the Messiah. Just fifteen verses later, we hear Jesus proclaim the “good news.” In his own words, he declares, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (verse 15). The coming of Jesus is good news in every way possible. How is Jesus the source of good news in the world and in your life? What are some ways you can share the good news of Jesus with people around you who live in a world saturated with bad news?

Journal:

- What were some of the conditions in the world at the time Mark wrote his Gospel that made good news so needed and welcomed?
- What are some things in our world today that make the good news of Jesus stand out?

Pray: Thank Jesus for leaving heaven, entering our world, and bringing good news to every person who will receive what he has to offer.

DAY 3

Read: Mark 1:16–28.

Reflect: Jesus' invitation was simple but powerful: "Follow me." All four of the men Jesus invited to be his disciples freely left their careers and began a new life. They stopped fishing with nets and began to fish for people. They followed their Rabbi, Jesus, and walked with him, traveled where he went, learned from his teaching, and became like their leader. What have you left behind so that you could follow Jesus and

engage in his plan for your life? What do you still need to lay down and surrender so that you can fully live for Jesus?

Journal:

- How has it felt to leave things behind, make sacrifices, and surrender your will for the sake of Jesus?
- What is one thing that you are having a hard time letting go? What step can you take to lay this down and follow Jesus with greater abandon?

Pray: Ask God to give you wisdom to see what still needs to be laid down and left behind as you follow Jesus. Pray for the courage to follow Jesus no matter the cost or the sacrifice.

DAY 4

Read: Mark 1:29–45.

Reflect: This section of Mark starts with an intense day of ministry where Jesus heals, leads a revival meeting, and casts out demons. It ends with Jesus healing a man with leprosy. In the middle of this action, Jesus slips away early in the

morning to find a quiet place so he can talk with his Father. He takes a walk in the dark, finds a solitary place, and prays. It seems the more intense life became, the more Jesus needed to be in the presence of the Father. How does busyness and an intense schedule impact your prayer life? What can you do to make space to pray and meet with Jesus on a regular basis?

Journal:

- What are some of the habits, patterns, and disciplines you have developed that have helped you better connect with God?
- What experiences in your day seem to push you away from God? How can you make space to meet with God during those times?

DAY 5

Read: Mark 2:1–17.

Reflect: There are many characters in this story. As always, Jesus is central. But as you read this story, pay special attention to the religious leaders (the teachers of the law). These are religious professionals. As Jesus is speaking, they ask

themselves a great question: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (verse 7). The answer is important: “No one!” Only God can forgive sins. But this is Jesus’ point. He is God, fully divine, the Almighty One! Mark asks this question—“who is Jesus?”—again and again in his Gospel. Our Savior gives an answer in this passage . . . He is God! How has Jesus extended forgiveness to you as you walk with him each day? How will you pray for those in your life who need to know the forgiveness they long for is found in Christ?

Journal:

- As you think about this passage, what were the religious leaders right about? What were the religious leaders wrong about?
- Since Jesus is divine and fully God, how should this view the way you think about him, worship him, and follow him?

Pray: Lift up praise to Jesus as God Almighty, your Creator, and the One who paid the full price so that your sins could be washed away.

DAY 6

Read: Mark 2:18–3:6.

Reflect: There is a lot of intensity and emotion in this passage. A man with a physical ailment needs healing. The religious leaders are suspicious of Jesus and seeking to accuse him of breaking their laws. Jesus is deeply concerned for the man and cares about his condition. When he asks the religious leaders about the appropriateness of healing the man right then and there—on the *Sabbath*—they stay silent and stubborn. Jesus is angry and deeply distressed at the condition of their hearts. For them, religion had become more important than people.

At the end of the passage, Jesus heals the man. This should have brought joy to everyone—including the religious leaders. But they were so upset at Jesus breaking their rules that they want to have him executed. What are some ways religious rules and observances can actually get in the way of following Jesus? Are there any religious rituals, rules, or observances that are a roadblock to you following the Savior?

Journal:

- What are some of the man-made rules and regulations that can get in the way of following Jesus?

- In what ways do you need to focus more on your Savior and less on human regulations?

Pray: Thank Jesus for loving people more than upholding religious traditions. Pray for your heart and life to mirror his example of compassion and action that sets people free.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Mark 1:16–17:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

Reflect: Come follow me! Go out and live for me! This was Jesus' call to his first disciples—and his call to us today. What does it mean for you to follow Jesus in the flow of a normal day? What are some ways that you sense Jesus is calling you to go out and live for him?



40 DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO
SIX SESSIONS

FIRST & SECOND
THESSALONIANS

KEEP CALM & CARRY ON

LEVI LUSKO

4⏮ DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

A WORLD-CHANGING FAITH

SIX-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

LEVI LUSKO

WITH KEVIN & SHERRY HARNEY



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Resources

40 Days Through the Book: 1 & 2 Thessalonians Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION

I AND 2 THESSALONIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The letters to God's people in the church in Thessalonica were written by Paul, the Pastor. First and Second Thessalonians came from deep within his pastoral heart. Although there are clear theological underpinnings, Paul's primary focus in these letters is how we should live more than a deep exposition of what we are to believe. These profoundly personal letters were written around AD 50–52 and address what it looks like to live as a Christian. These letters were written to real-life people living in the largest city in Macedonia. This capital city was at the crossroads of the world. Positioned on the Via Egnatia and Thermic Gulf (both travel and trade routes), Thessalonica was a center of culture, religion (of every sort), and trade.

THE BIG PICTURE

When Paul and his ministry companions arrived in the city of Thessalonica, they came battered, bruised, and weary. They had just been in Philippi and had been stripped, flogged, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison. After being miraculously set free from jail and leading a revival meeting with the jailer and his family, they moved on (see Acts 16:16–40). The next stop was Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1–9).

Rather than find a quiet place to lick his wounds and have a little “me time,” Paul went right to the synagogue in Thessalonica and for three weeks in a row he preached the message of Jesus the Messiah. By the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, some Jews became Jesus followers and many Greeks who were spiritually hungry also came to faith in the Savior.

Once again, conflict arose, mobs incited violence, and the Christians in the city packed up Paul and his ministry companions and sent them on to Berea. They were only in Thessalonica for a couple of months, but Paul fell in love with the people in this fresh new Jesus community.

What happened next is staggering and beautiful! It stands as an example for all Christians, in all places, at all times. The believers in the city of Thessalonica fell so in love with Jesus and followed the Savior with such passion, that word of their faith began to spread from city to city. Paul would show up in a new region to do ministry and the people there were already talking about how the Thessalonian believers had warmly welcomed Paul and his companions, how they had rejected idols and embraced the true and living

God, and how their lives were focused fully on Jesus (see 1 Thessalonians 1:7–10).

In response, Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write two short, power-packed letters to this group of passionate Jesus followers. The first letter is only 89 verses. The second is 47 verses. Think about it, Psalm 119 is 150 verses long. The two letters to the Thessalonian church are only 136 verses combined. Yet, Paul addresses many of the core beliefs and practices Christians of all maturity levels need to know about to honor Jesus and impact the world.

The books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians stand out as deeply pastoral and practical for all believers. If you want to remember what really matters about faith in Jesus and hear the call to follow Jesus on your daily adventure of faith, these books will propel you forward on your journey.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **The power of an effective witness.** Be a faithful and passionate follower of Jesus and the world will see and be impacted (1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 1).
- **God delights in resilient faith.** Stand strong in your faith and hang in there, even when things get tough (1 Thessalonians chapter 2 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 2).

- **Keep the gospel of Jesus central . . . always.** There are many things that matter, but at the center of our faith and lives should be the good news of Jesus (1 Thessalonians chapter 2).
- **Live with Christian love, care, and family tenderness.** We should be concerned for the well-being of others. Of all the commandments, Jesus was clear that loving people should always be central to who we are and what we do (1 Thessalonians chapter 3).
- **Let Jesus be Lord of all.** Follow Jesus and live for him in every part of your life. This is what it means to be his follower (1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 3).
- **This life is not the end of the story.** Jesus will come again! So, we are to live for our Savior every day and be ready to see him face to face for eternity (1 Thessalonians chapters 4 and 5 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 2).

Thessalonica was positioned on major trade routes—a cultural center and a hub of all sorts of religious activity. If the good news of Jesus could take root in this place, it would spread across the known world. There were travelers in and out of this region daily and they were headed to the ends of the earth . . . literally! The simple truths that God taught these believers through the letters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians were world-changing. They still are! These same truths can transform your life and continue through you to impact people all over your world.

THE WORD IS OUT

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

*When we encounter Jesus, the Messiah,
everything changes. When our lives are transformed
by the power of the Savior, people notice, the word
gets out, and the good news spreads.*

WELCOME

What does it take for the word to get out? How fast does news spread? At the speed of thought, the typing of a message, and the hitting of a send button. In a world of social media and instant global communication, the word gets out in about thirty seconds.

Good news, bad news, world updates, personal secrets, accurate or inaccurate, news spreads faster than wildfire! It has not always been this way. Just a few short decades ago,

people used phones as a primary means of communication, and they would pass on information to one person at a time. Before that, they sent letters that were hand sorted and delivered days later. The word would get out, but it was much slower. If the average person wanted to get the word on newsworthy stories and topics, they had to wait until evening and turn on their television so they could hear a news anchor report on the day's stories.

In the ancient world of the New Testament, getting the word out was very difficult. No phones, no computers, no TV, no social media. Communication happened person to person and most of it was verbal. A vast part of the population did not read, and the cost of writing materials was high. Even if a letter was written, it had to be hand carried from one place to another. In the days of the apostle Paul, news traveled exceedingly slow.

What was staggering about the church in the city of Thessalonica is that in a world with no social media, phones, or postal services, the word about their faith and love for Jesus moved faster than the apostle Paul could travel. It seemed that everywhere he went, the story of their bold and deep faith got there first.

Imagine if this were to happen to you and your church. What if the story of your church and your personal faith was spreading all over your city, county, and state? What story would be told? What themes would emerge? If someone were to post pictures and stories about how you live for Jesus, would that be a good thing? Would the world be inspired by your example? Would your life of faith draw people to Jesus and bring glory to his name?

SHARE

If someone secretly followed you around for a week and took pictures of what you did and recorded what you said, what are some of the positive things they could tell others to get the word out on your life? What would they see that points to the presence, power, and beauty of Jesus?

WATCH

Play the video for session one. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts, questions, or key points that stand out to you.

A powerful overview of the Christian journey

1 and 2 Thessalonians is for everyone . . . for both the new believer and the mature follower of Jesus

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

Meeting Levi, his family, and a dog named Tabasco

The **Why**: The word was out

The **Who**: Paul and his ministry team

The **First Connection**: Affirmation and Correction

The **Second Connection**: Communication and
Demonstration

The Third Connection: Tribulation and Jubilation

The Fourth and Final Connection: Reception and
Transmission

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

- I. What impacted you the most as you watched Levi's teaching on 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10?

2. What are signs that we are growing in faith, love, and hope? Which of these three characteristics has been strongest in your life over the past month and how do you see this attribute growing?

What are indicators that a person's faith, love, and hope are waning and need to be rekindled? Which of these three needs more attention in your own life and what is one step you can take to increase it?

3. **Read 1 Thessalonians 1:4–7.** Tell about a person in your life who has clearly communicated the message of the Bible to you. Share one lesson you have learned from this person who models what it looks like to embrace the beauty of God's truth. How are you seeking to follow the example of this person and teach the message of the Bible to another person?

4. Describe different ways God pricks our heart, holds up a mirror for us to see something wrong, or wakes us up to an area of much needed growth. Why do you think God does this? Tell about a time God did this in the past or how he is doing it right now. What does God want to transform in you, and how can your group members be part of this journey of growth?

5. **Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10.** Describe, in your own words, what the people around the ancient world were saying about the Christians in the Thessalonian church. What would it mean in your community today if everyone was saying the same sorts of things about you and the members of your congregation?

6. Tell about a person who you long to come to faith in Jesus. How can your group members support you and inspire you in your journey of gospel transmission to this person?

MEMORIZE

Each session, you will be given a key verse from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verse is 1 Thessalonians 1:3:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have everyone recite this verse out loud. Ask for any volunteers who would like to say the verse from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is one practical next step you can take to carry the love and truth of Jesus to the unique places you go in the flow of a normal week?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Thank God for the people in your life who have lived as an example of mature faith.

- Ask God to help you live in a way that communicates the love and good news of Jesus and that also demonstrates the love and grace of Jesus.
- Pray for your group members to experience deep and lasting joy, even in times of tribulation.
- Lift up a prayer for one person in your personal circle who really needs to receive the gospel of Jesus. Offer yourself to God and invite him to use you to share Jesus naturally with this person.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verse to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, the last day, you will review the key verse and reflect on what you have learned for the week.

DAY I

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting 1 Thessalonians 1:3:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now try to say the verse from memory.

Reflect: Take time throughout the day to take note of your words, actions, attitudes, motives. Pay special attention to where your faith is alive and active. Think about what people see and might be saying about you and your faith. Be humble and honest. Without being prideful, what are ways you can let your faith in Jesus be noticed by the people you encounter in a normal day?

DAY 2

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1–2.

Reflect: We can speak well of other believers and local churches. Take time this week to learn about a church in your community (other than the one you attend). Browse their website. You may want to ask a friend or neighbor about the church they attend and what they love about their church family and the ministry of their church. Then, make a point of telling others (in your church, other churches, or even non-believers) about the good things you have heard about that church. Get the word out and bless that church. You might even write a note to their pastor and thank them for their ministry.

Journal:

- List ways you could affirm and celebrate the lives of Christians you know. Be specific and be sure these are doable and practical. Also, include one action you can take to get out the good word.
- What keeps you from affirming other people and churches? What can you do to overcome this obstacle?

Pray: Ask God for eyes to see the good things in other believers and churches. Then, pray for the Holy Spirit to give you courage to speak well of this person or church in public settings.

DAY 3

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3–4.

Reflect: Use your journal space below to make a list of three Christians you know who are really seeking to follow Jesus. Next to their names, write one or two positive behaviors or actions you see in their lives. Then, send them a text, email, or call to affirm them for being a wonderful example for you and others.

Journal:

- List of behaviors you see in mature Christians that inspire you to be more like Jesus.
- Write a prayer asking God to infuse you with Holy Spirit power to adopt one of these behaviors for yourself.

Pray: Ask God to give you courage to regularly and consistently affirm the people in your life. Pray for eyes to see the good examples of others and adopt these God-honoring practices in your own life.

DAY 4

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5.

Reflect: Make an effort to align your words and your actions. Look for times you say something but fail to act on it. Christians are notorious for saying things like, “I’ll pray for you,” and then

they forget to pray. If this happens to you, consider one of these solutions: (1) Don't say, "I'll pray for you." Instead, say, "May I pray for you right now?" Then, do it. (2) If you say you will pray, stop right then and there, and add a daily reminder on your phone so you have a pop-up every day for a week. (3) The minute you have open time following the encounter when you promised to pray, carve out a few minutes to lift up the need you promised to pray for.

Pick one area of your life where there is no alignment between words and actions and make a plan to correct it.

Journal:

- Write down the area you want to work on aligning your words and actions.
- Write down two or three ways you can take a practical step to make this alignment.

Pray: Ask God to open your eyes to see where your words and actions need to be consistent.

DAY 5

Read: 2 Thessalonians 1.

Reflect: Read Acts 16:16–40 and study the situation and attitudes of Paul and Silas. Read Philippians 4:4–7 and reflect on how these words relate to a situation such as the one Paul faced in Acts 16. Think about how you respond to hard times and what happens to your joy quotient in these difficult situations.

Journal:

- Write down your thoughts as you read Acts 16:16–40 and Philippians 4:4–7.
- Take note of how you tend to respond in hard times and how much joy (or lack of joy) you have when times are tough.

Pray: Ask God to help you keep your eyes on him and your heart joyful in the tough times of life. Pray for people you love who are going through painful situations right now. Ask the Holy Spirit of the Living God to breathe joy into their heart and lives.

DAY 6

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2-3.

Reflect: We all know people (family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers . . .) who have never received the amazing grace of Jesus. Take time to pray for each one, asking God to open their heart to the prompting and invitation of the Spirit.

Journal:

- Write the names of three to five people you know who are not yet followers of Jesus.
- Make a list of simple and practical ways you can serve them in the name of Jesus: pray for them, make a meal or do some other act of kindness for them, seek to share what your relationship with Jesus means to you.

Pray: Ask God to give you the right words and courage to have a spiritual conversation with at least one person that you write about in the journal section above.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting 1 Thessalonians 1:3:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Reflect: Our words have power. More power than most of us recognize. Take ten minutes to review your recent texts and emails that are personal in nature. Honestly and humbly ask yourself if your words are thoughtful and gracious. Or, are they sharp and harsh? In the coming days, seek to be as gracious and kind as you can with your words—both written and spoken—while still communicating what needs to be said.

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a body of water. The sky is filled with warm, orange and red clouds. In the foreground, a wooden fence made of logs and posts runs across the frame, leading the eye towards the horizon. The water is calm, reflecting the light from the sky.

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EMBRACING JOY

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WITH KEVIN AND SHERRY HARNEY



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INTRODUCTION

PHILIPPIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi between AD 60 and 62. He was a prisoner and chained to a Roman guard. In this dark and discouraging place Paul's joy was not extinguished but continued to burn bright. The city of Philippi took its name from Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. It was one of his military strongholds in northern Greece. Fast-forward a few hundred years, and Philippi was conquered by the Romans in 31 BC. So, Paul is writing to Roman citizens. They spoke the Latin language. They wore Roman dress. Their coins had Roman inscriptions. The city itself was patterned after Rome, and it sat on the Via Egnatia, which was a major military road in the Roman Empire.

Philippi had a wide variety of religious influences. There were altars to Greek gods. Archaeologists have found sanctuaries to the Egyptian gods Iris and Serapis. And, of course, there

were monuments to the Caesars. The Imperial Cult, as it was called, was the official state religion. There was also a Jewish community that lived in Philippi. It was to these Christians in this pluralistic and secular environment that Paul wrote a letter of unparalleled joy.

THE BIG PICTURE

Just four chapters, 104 verses, and Paul mentions his Savior more than forty times. Every theme and truth found in Philippians is saturated in the presence and power of Jesus. It is in this book that we find the great Christ hymn that gives a vision of Jesus' incarnation, humiliation, sacrifice, and ultimate glorification. Joy is everywhere in the book of Philippians, and that is because Jesus is present in all places, even in persecution. While incarcerated and chained, Paul's heart is free, and he can rejoice.

History does seem to repeat itself. When Paul came to the city of Philippi his plan was to proclaim the gospel and lift up Jesus as the Messiah. After sharing the good news with a group of women outside the city along a river, a businesswoman named Lydia came to faith in the Savior and was baptized along with many members of her family (Acts 16:11–15). After being taunted by a demon-possessed woman for many days, Paul cast out the evil spirit, which led to a major uproar in the city (Acts 16:16–24). The Roman leaders responded swiftly and severely. Paul and his ministry team were all publicly stripped, beaten with rods, severely flogged, put in prison, thrown in the inner cell, and fastened in the stocks.

At midnight the other prisoners and the guard were treated to a worship concert and prayer meeting. In a shocking and reflexive act of faith, Paul and his companions burst into songs of praise and prayers of adoration. Joy and music filled the prison! These bruised and battered Christians were not cursing God, government, or guards through clenched teeth. They were celebrating the grace of Jesus with open mouths and hearts.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was in jail again. He was rejoicing again. He was willingly suffering with a smile on his face, prayers on his lips, and a song in his heart. History was repeating itself.

EPIC THEMES

There are several themes in Philippians that are worthy of our focus. These include:

- **Love-filled prayer.** The recipients of this letter are not strangers but friends, family, beloved partners in the gospel. You can feel Paul's affection for these people all through this prayer and the whole letter (see Philippians 1:1–11).
- **Evangelistic hopefulness.** Paul actually finds joy in the fact that his unfair incarceration has given him an up-close chance to share Jesus with each and every guard to whom he was chained. Before you knew it, the whole palace guard knew Paul's story and the story of Jesus (see Philippians 1:12–26).

- **The humility and exaltation of Jesus.** In one of the first recorded hymns of the early church we see the willing heart of Jesus to leave glory, live perfectly, die sacrificially, and rise in victory. Because of this, every knee will bow to him and every tongue in all creation declare that Jesus is Lord (see Philippians 2:1–11).
- **When we know Jesus, we are transformed.** Paul calls all followers of the Savior to grow in faith, adjust their attitudes, and walk in holiness. To help us have a picture of what this can look like, we get snapshots of two faithful and humble servants: Timothy and Epaphroditus (see Philippians 2:12–30).
- **A contrast of human righteousness and the righteousness of Jesus.** Legalism and trust in human religious devotion is always a temptation, but Paul teaches us that this is all garbage compared to the cleansing and glorious grace of Jesus (see Philippians 3).
- **Keep your eyes on Jesus.** How do you resolve conflicts? How do you stay joyful in hard times? How do you keep keeping on when you are weary? The answer to all three of these questions is: keep your eyes and focus locked firmly on Jesus (see Philippians 4:1–9).
- **Contentment and a generous heart grow out of a love for Jesus.** The transformational power of our Lord will change us at the deepest level . . . even the temptation

to be possessed by possessions can be overcome by the power of our risen Lord (see Philippians 4:10–20).

The heartbeat of Philippians is for believers to have a Jesus-centered vision of life. How do we find joy in all of life's ups and downs? Jesus! How do we grow in contentment and generosity? Jesus! How do we grow in contentment and generosity? Jesus! Where should our focus be so that our life makes sense? Jesus! Perhaps these words from the prayer of Saint Patrick summarize it best: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me . . . Christ when I lie down . . . Christ when I arise."

A LOVE LETTER

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-8

As followers of Jesus, we have heard the call to love God with all that is in us and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this letter, we get a vision of how we should feel about other followers of Jesus and how we should express these feelings openly to them.

WELCOME

All throughout history, people have been writing love letters in an attempt to express the passions of their heart. But a few notable examples stand out above the rest. As a young military officer, Napoleon Bonaparte met Josephine in 1795 and fell in love with her. He wrote letters to her while he was at war, though she rarely wrote back to him. In one of these notes, he stated, “A few days ago I thought I loved you; but since I last

saw you, I feel I love you a thousand times more. All the time I have known you, I adore you more each day.”

Ludwig van Beethoven was a famous German composer who works rank among the most performed in all of classic music. He first began writing music in 1802 and continued to compose works until his death in 1827—even in spite of increasing deafness. Beethoven’s passion rang out in his music, but as it turns out, he could be passionate in his words as well. After his death, an unsent love letter was found among his papers in which he expressed these sentiments: “My thoughts rush to you, my immortal beloved, now and then joyfully, then again sadly, waiting to know whether Fate will hear our prayer—to face life I must live altogether with you or never see you.” The intended recipient of this letter remains a mystery.

But the most famous love letter of them all is found in the Bible. The book known simply as the “Song of Songs” is a passionate dialogue between a man and his beloved. In one section of the letter, the man uses this descriptive language to describe his beloved: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from the hills of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. each has its twin; not one of them is alone” (4:1–2).

The book of Philippians is also an ancient love letter. But it is not a letter between a man and a woman. Rather, it is a letter sent from the heart of God to his church, his people, his bride. The words are inspired through the apostle Paul to the church in the city of Philippi. But the words of this letter are clearly a message from the heart of God to his beloved . . . to you and me.

SHARE

Who is a person God has placed in your life that you have deep and sincere affection for (other than people in your small group)? What have you experienced together that has forged this kind of rich relationship?

WATCH

Play the video for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts, questions, or key points that stand out to you.

The setting and the writer of Philippians

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting Scripture (Pardes)

Peshat . . . Simple, plain, devotional Bible reading

Remez . . . Cues and clues in the text of Scripture

PHILIPPIANS

Deresh . . . Connecting the dots as we interpret Scripture

Sod . . . When the Holy Spirit speaks to us through Scripture

The when, where, and who of Philippians (Philippians 1:1–2)

A Love Letter (Philippians 1:3–8)

God closes one door and opens another (Acts 16:6–25)

Responding to hardship . . . whining or worship?

A serious challenge: Prophecy your praise . . . praise God before he does it

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Mark's teaching on Philippians 1 and Acts 16?
2. Some people regurgitate what they hear from culture, media, and society. They act like a thermometer that reflects the world around them. Others declare the revelation of God and, like a thermostat, they raise the temperature and change the environment, the conversation, and sometimes the world. What do Christians sound like when we are simply regurgitating the prevailing voices of our culture? What will we sound like when we are articulating the timely revelation of God's Word in a bold and transformational way?

3. **Read Philippians 1:3–8.** What do we learn about Paul's relationship with the believers in the city of Philippi from this passage? As you think about the Christian community where God has placed you, what can you thank God for about this body of believers (God's church)? What are ways you can show affection and love to the members of your church?

4. **Read Acts 16:6–10.** Tell about a time you had your plans and future all laid out and God surprised you with a whole different agenda. How did you see God work through this process? How did God bring glory to himself (and blessing to you) through his divine change of your plans?

5. **Read Acts 16:16–18.** Mark talks about how the enemy of our soul wants to dominate and control our lives, and that we must exercise spiritual authority and fight back. What are ways we can resist, push back, and overcome the enticements and work of the enemy? Tell about a time you did this and saw God win a battle.

6. When times of hardship, suffering, or loss hit our lives, what are some of the very real ways (good or bad) we respond? What do you learn from the response of Paul, and how can you follow his example?

MEMORIZE

Each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verses are Philippians 1:3–4:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . .

Have everyone recite these verses out loud. Ask for any volunteers who would like to say the verses from memory.

RESPOND

Paul's relationship with God's people in the city of Philippi was forged through struggles, pain, public turmoil, and partnership in ministry. Why is it that some of our deepest and longest lasting relationships have included times in the furnace of life together? How did God forge a deep relationship

between Paul and the Philippian Christians through difficult and painful times?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Thank God for the people he has placed in your life who you love deeply and for whom you have sincere affection. Ask for God's blessing on their lives.
- Pray for courage to learn from the apostle Paul's example so that you can express your love and appreciation for the people God has placed in your life.
- If you, or someone in your group, are in the middle of a spiritual battle, pray for God's victory, for awareness of the tactics of the enemy, and for the power of the Holy Spirit to be unleashed.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verse(s) to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Philippians, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, the last day, you will review the key verse(s) and reflect on what you have learned for the week.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Philippians 1:3–4:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . .

Now try to say these verses from memory.

Reflect: There is power in our memories. Think back over your time being part of God's family. In particular, reflect on good memories, kind people, meaningful sermons, and life-impacting moments. Thank God for the people in the family of God who have been a blessing in your life. If you want to go one step deeper, send one or more of these people an email, text, or letter expressing a memory of them that is meaningful to you.

DAY 2

Read: Philippians 1 and take time to focus on Philippians 1:1-2.

Reflect: What comes to your mind when you look at yourself in a mirror first thing in the morning? Try this on for size. "I am a saint. I am a holy one of God." This is not what most of us think when we reflect on who we are at the start of the day or when we put our head on the pillow at night. But it's true! The apostle Paul refers to the people of God in the city of Philippi as "God's holy people." Another way to say this is, "God's saints." Through Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for our sins, we are cleansed and made holy. Amazing! Take time this week and try to see yourself through the eyes and finished work of Jesus. Be reminded that the holy God of heaven looks at you and sees one of his saints. Believe it and grow into that reality.

Journal:

- Why do I have a hard time seeing myself as one of God's "holy people"?
- How I can grow in seeing myself as a saint of God (i.e., how can I adjust my words, attitudes, and actions to reflect this spiritual reality)?

Pray: Praise God for his holiness and ask for the power of his Spirit to help you embrace who you are in Jesus as you seek to become more like your Lord.

DAY 3

Read: Philippians 2 and Philippians 1:1–2.

Reflect: Grace and peace. What beautiful and powerful words! What a greeting! Paul not only used these words to begin his letter to the church, but he sought to bring peace wherever he went and extend grace to each person he met. What are ways you can bring peace to the people you encounter in your neighborhood, workplace, church, and everywhere you go? How can you bear the grace of Jesus as you interact with believers and with people who do not yet follow him?

Journal:

- What are places and situations you will enter this week that really need peace? How can you be sure to bring peace and not more tension and turmoil?
- In our graceless world, people hunger for signs of kindness, goodness, and grace. Consider someone you will encounter this week who needs a touch of grace? How can you bring the grace of Jesus into this situation?

Pray: Ask God to bring reminders to you throughout this week of how you can bear his peace and grace wherever you go.

DAY 4

Read: Philippians 3 and Philippians 1:6.

Reflect: There are two truths that Paul unveils in Philippians 1:6. First, God is at work in you. The Maker of heaven and earth is intimately involved in your life. He is close and active. He has a plan for your life. Second, God is not done growing you. He will bring his work to completion, but you are still on the journey. You can receive these truths with joy and confidence:

God is near and working in me. God will accomplish his purposes and plans in me. What is God doing in you today and how can you partner in his wise and good plan?

Journal:

- What are ways that God has been working in you, growing you, and making you more like Jesus?
- How can you partner with God to keep taking steps forward in these areas of growth?

Pray: Ask for courage and power to keep taking steps forward in God's will for your life. Ask the Spirit to show you if there is a place of needed growth where you are stalled and need to begin pressing forward today.

DAY 5

Read: Philippians 4 and Philippians 1:7.

Reflect: Love is never chained. Though Paul was in chains, he still felt deep affection for his friends in Philippi and

communicated his love to them in this letter. He was incarcerated because he confidently followed Jesus and boldly proclaimed the gospel. But even from jail Paul wrote words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that lavished God's people with love from heaven. When we feel confined, trapped, and bound up, we can still receive, enjoy, and share the love of God. What can you learn from Paul's example of being chained but still free to share the love of Jesus?

Journal:

- What situations and circumstances in life tend to bind you up and keep you from expressing love and care for others?
- How can you continue speaking and showing love no matter what life circumstances come your way?

Pray: Ask God to help you speak words of love and take actions that reveal the love of Jesus, no matter how hard your life becomes.

DAY 6

Read: Philippians 1:8.

Reflect: The affection of Jesus. What an amazing idea! Paul's longing for the Christians in Philippi was straight from the heart of the Savior. What do we do when our energy runs low and our heart becomes a bit calloused? How do we live for Jesus when our body is tired, our schedule jam-packed, and we are feeling weary? In those moments (and they come for all of us) we live and love in the power of Jesus. Have you ever asked Jesus to grow your love and longing for other people? Have you dared to say, "Jesus, make your longing my longing—make my heart and love like yours"? These are powerful prayers. Dare to lift them up today.

Journal:

- Where has your love grown cold and your heart become calloused?
- How can you walk closer to Jesus so that your heart will become more and more like his?

Pray: Dare to pray that the heart, love, and longing of Jesus would flood your life so that you will look and live more like the Savior.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Philippians 1:3–4:

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . .

Reflect: There is power in joyful prayers. These can be prayers of praise to God, supplication for the needs of others, or thanksgiving for God's goodness. As you lift your heart in prayer, be sure you are not getting into such a routine that you say the words, but your passion is waning. Pray for joy to fill you to overflowing and for your prayers to be filled with passionate celebration. What is the joy level of your prayers and how can you increase it for the glory of Jesus?

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several tall skyscrapers in a city, likely New York City. The buildings are made of glass and steel, with many windows reflecting the sky. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The perspective creates a sense of height and grandeur.

40 DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO

SIX SESSIONS

EPHESIANS

LIFE IN GOD'S DIVERSE FAMILY

DERWIN GRAY

4⏮ DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

EPHESIANS

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SIX-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

DERWIN GRAY

WITH KEVIN AND SHERRY HARNEY



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Resources

40 Days Through the Book: Ephesians

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The themes of this study are drawn from the video study of the same name by Derwin Gray. All other resources, including the session introductions, small group discussion questions, prayer direction, and the 40 Days learning and reflection exercises, have been written by Kevin and Sherry Harney in collaboration with Derwin Gray.

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INTRODUCTION

EPHESIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus c. AD 60–62. At the time, he was under house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day. He had few freedoms as a prisoner of Rome, but he was allowed to have guests and also write letters to some of the churches that he cared deeply about. One of those churches was a congregation in the city of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey), where Paul had spent more than two years. One of the things the apostle celebrated was that this congregation looked like the vision of heaven that we see in the book of Revelation (see 7:9). It was a multiethnic, beautifully diverse body of men and women, Jews and Gentiles, enslaved and free people. The people in the Ephesian church were from a wide variety of tribes, people groups, and nations. On top of all this, they loved each other! They were united in Jesus. Their community not only embraced the gospel but also showed the world what that gospel could look like.

THE BIG PICTURE

Ephesus was filled with pagan temples, and idolatry was rampant. There was tension between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) that had been brewing off and on for centuries. The Jewish people held the Gentiles in contempt for mistreating their people throughout their history. The Gentiles held the Jews in contempt for seeing them as immoral and “unclean.” How were these two radically diverse groups of people going to become a loving and united family? It looked impossible from a human perspective. But Ephesians is a reminder that God loves taking what looks impossible and turning it upside-down. Our God can take enemies and make them friends. He can take people from every walk of life and help them walk in the unity of his Son.

The six chapters of Ephesians can be seen as two movements in the same story of God seeking to build a multiethnic, united, loving family of dramatically diverse people. Both sections address the same topics but in different ways. Movement one, the first three chapters of Ephesians, is about *who we are in Christ*. Paul looks at our identity as followers of Jesus and lays out more than twenty distinct and powerful pictures for us to lock into our heart and soul. When we know who God is and who we are, we have a fresh outlook on the people around us. We can see them as God does.

Movement two, chapters four through six of Ephesians, are about *how we live in Christ*. The apostle Paul communicates more than thirty commands and directives for ways that God’s diverse family members need to live in community. If we are going to be a race of grace, we must walk in the ways of Jesus,

put off old patterns and behaviors, and love others as Jesus does. When we know who we are and when we have deep conviction about who God is, then we know how to live, love, serve, and grow in community with other people.

The truth and power of Ephesians leaves a tattoo on our souls. God's plan is bigger than just us and Jesus. His vision is as big as the world and as dynamic as the people he has made. When we realize that the grace of Jesus is big enough for everyone—even people who are different than us—we can become part of God's plan to build his diverse family of faith.

EPIC THEMES

There are many themes in Ephesians that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **Jesus loves his diverse family.** Grace is the pathway into God's family. God is drawing in people from every tribe, background, and walk of life, and his family is always as diverse as the human race. Jesus is Lord and the Holy Spirit transforms hearts, so God's family can be united and love one another in the midst of many differences. When this happens, God delights, and the world looks on in wonder (see Ephesians 1:1–10).
- **We are chosen and marked.** God has a plan and a purpose. His gospel is the source of salvation and the transformation that every person needs. By his Holy Spirit he draws us, marks us, and leads us (see Ephesians 1:11–14).

- **God is making a new race of grace.** God is making a family of people from every nation and background. All are invited into God's race of grace and united to each other. It is a shocking vision of God's power to save, heal, and bind people into a community (see Ephesians 1:15–2:13).
- **God delights when his family lives at peace with others.** The peace that Paul writes about is not a cessation of turmoil or tension. It is a picture of people walking with Jesus toward each other and becoming a family. It was no easy task for Jews and Gentiles to live in peace and become a model of unity for the world. But, in the power of Jesus, it became a reality in the church in Ephesus—and it can be a reality in the church today (see Ephesians 2:14–22).
- **We are servants of the gospel.** Everyone will end up serving someone or something. Followers of Jesus learn that serving the gospel, sharing it with the world, and being a model of the transforming power of Jesus is the absolute best investment of our lives (see Ephesians 3:1–21).
- **We are called to a new life.** Followers of Jesus are called to strip off the old ways and take on the heart of Jesus. Out with impurity, greed, obscenity, and in with humility, patience, love, and thankfulness. As we allow Jesus to shape our lives, his family becomes healthy, vibrant, and shines the light of the gospel in our dark world (see Ephesians 4:1–6:9).

- **We are called to stand strong.** There is a battle at hand. Our awareness of that battle does not change the reality of it one single bit! There are dark forces of evil at work in the heavenly realms, and every person in God's family needs to stand, put on the armor of the Spirit, and fight back. When we do, we will see the victory of Jesus (see Ephesians 6:10–24).

In a world of division, conflict, and polarization, the same Jesus who united the Jews and Gentiles, enslaved and free people, men and women, and people from every tribe and tongue some 2,000 years ago in Ephesus, is ready to do it again. God is still building his diverse family of faith. It will not always be easy, but when we participate and partner with God in his plans, we bring him glory, bless other believers, and serve as a witness to the world.

A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA

EPHESIANS 1:1–23

Of all the revolutionary ideas found in the Bible, one that should shake us and wake us up is that God turns enemies into friends and is uniting people of radically diverse backgrounds into one beautiful and loving family.

WELCOME

The Bible is full of revolutionary ideas. This should not surprise us. From the first word of Genesis to the final word of Revelation, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is speaking. He is sovereign, all-powerful, glorious, and his ways are not our ways. When God spoke at the beginning of all things, the heavens, the earth, and all of creation sprung into existence out of nothing (see Genesis 1–2). This is stunning beyond description. One day the Spirit and the bride will

say, “Come” and all of history will be rolled up like a scroll (Revelation 22:17). Amazing!

Sometimes we read the words of God contained in the pages of the Bible and forget how counter-cultural and shocking they were at the time they were written—and how shocking they still are today. Instead of being amazed, we pass over these ideas as if they are common. Because they are familiar, we forget that they are revolutionary.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). This call runs counter to our human nature and is as shocking today as it was when Christ declared it some 2,000 years ago. John wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). What depth of love could have moved the Father to offer his precious Son for us? James wrote, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10). God’s call for each of us is to put aside our own personal pride and look first to the needs of others. These words are revolutionary in the culture of our day.

We find these similar staggering words in the opening of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ . . . he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to *bring unity to all things* in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:4–5, 8–10, emphasis added).

God chose before the foundation of the world and adopted us into his own family. The Almighty Creator has made known

to us the mystery of his will. And he desires to bring unity to all things under Christ. He is birthing a family of diverse people who will be a loving and united family today and forever. This vision bears the seeds of heavenly revolution!

SHARE

Think about what it would look like if local Christian congregations became a picture of beautiful diversity and radical unity. What message would this send to the world around us? What would onlookers learn about our God just by looking at us?

WATCH

Play the video segment for session one (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Churches in the first century were trans-cultural and were socially, economically, and racially diverse

EPHESIANS

The precious blood of Jesus not only forgives sins but also unleashes the heavenly power needed to create a family out of people from every tribe, people group, and nation

Separate ingredients or a wonderful salad—which will it be?

All people (Jews and Gentiles) can be reconciled vertically to God and horizontally to each other through Jesus

The grace of Jesus creates a new and diverse family that is blessed beyond description (Ephesians 1:1–6)

A REVOLUTIONARY IDEA

God makes enemies into family through the redemption offered in the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 1:7–10)

God turns enemies into friends by sealing us with his love in the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:11–14)

God turns enemies into a loving family when we keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus (Ephesians 1:15–23)

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Derwin's teaching?

2. What are ways that churches today are taking Jesus-honoring steps forward in embracing diversity in the family of God? Why is it important that we continue making this a priority in the life of the church?

3. How is the Church made more beautiful, strong, and effective when we view it more like a salad than just the individual ingredients that make up the salad? What do we miss out on if we don't celebrate and embrace our differences?

4. **Read Ephesians 1:1–6.** What are some of the blessings God brings into our lives and his church when we learn to walk in unity? How have you personally experienced one of these blessings?

5. **Read Ephesians 1:7–10.** Of what are we set free through the blood of Jesus? How should this transform the way we live as individual Christians and as the family of God?

6. Read Ephesians 1:11–14. When we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and filled with the Spirit, we experience power for transformation. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit doing one of these things in your life:

- Helping you follow God’s purpose and live in his will?
- Helping you live with confident and growing hope?
- Letting your life bring praise and glory to God?
- Empowering you to walk in unity with believers who are different than you?
- Helping you live with awareness of the heavenly inheritance that is yours?

How can your group members specifically pray for you as you seek to grow in one of the areas listed above?

MEMORIZE

Each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verse is from Ephesians 1:3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Have everyone recite this verse out loud. Then go around the room and ask for any volunteers who would like to say the verse from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is one practical next step you can take to walk in harmony and unity with Christians who are different than you?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Thank God for the wonderful diversity in his people (and Church) all over your community, nation, and the world. Lift up praise for specific ways God has made people unique and beautiful.
- Confess where you have been fearful or resistant to embrace believers from different tongues, tribes, nations, and backgrounds.
- Pray for unity in your church, the churches in your community, and in the body of Christ around the world. Ask God to use the unity of his people to be a shining light in our dark world.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reject on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verse(s) to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Ephesians, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will review the theme of the session, reflect on what you have learned, and review how it has impacted your life.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Ephesians 1:3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Now try to say the verse completely from memory.

Reflect: Let those words wash over your soul and expand your mind. Through faith in Jesus, you now have at your disposal “every spiritual blessing.” Full and complete forgiveness of your sins . . . *check!* The fruit of the Holy Spirit growing in you . . . *check!* Heaven as your home . . . *check!* The family of God, the Church, as a haven in this lonely world . . . *check!* The list goes on and on. What are some of the spiritual blessings God has given you? Ponder them, write them below, reflect on good gifts, and seek to live with a growing awareness of “every spiritual blessing.” Lift up a prayer of thanks to Jesus for making all this possible.

DAY 2

Read: Ephesians 1:1–10.

Reflect: You have been adopted into the family of God. We all have been—if we have placed our faith in Jesus. This puts us on equal footing before the cross, in the heart of God, and in his Church. Every one of us should lift our voices in praise and bow our knees in adoration. One reason we should live and walk in absolute unity in the family of God is that God saw fit to adopt us as his daughters and sons. Like a beautiful tapestry, God is weaving together people of every imaginable

background and making us one. Why is it so important that we learn to see every believer—including ourselves—as invited guests in God’s family?

Journal:

- What potential problems might we experience in the Church if we see ourselves as “natural born members” of God’s family who have a special place but look at other people in the Church as adopted guests?
- God is seeking to bring unity all over our divided earth, and one way he accomplishes this is through the examples of Christians and churches who live and walk in unity. What are simple steps of unity you can take in the flow of a normal day?

Pray: Ask God to show you where your attitudes, behaviors, or words might be causing division or disunity in the church and confess these patterns. Pray for the Holy Spirit to work in you and through you to bring unity in your home, friendships, and the Church.

DAY 3

Read: Ephesians 1:11–12.

Reflect: God has a plan. He moves with divine purpose. Our creator does not act in random ways. He chooses and moves in ways that will accomplish his divine will. The end result is always his glory. When our world feels out of control, when conflicts arise, when our own weakness gets the best of us, we can turn our eyes to heaven and know that the Maker of all things is still on the throne and is in the process of working all things for the praise of his glory. How can you turn your eyes to heaven when life gets crazy and feels out of control?

Journal:

- How has God surprised you in the past by showing up, delivering, protecting, or leading you in difficult times? Write down one or two specific times you looked back and recognized that God was in control even when things seemed chaotic.
- What are you facing today that feels like it is spinning and veering off course? How can remembering God's

sovereign presence and movement in the past help you stand strong in your faith as you face this situation in the present?

Pray: Invite God to bring to your mind and heart different times in the past when he has guided, protected, or led you through hard times. Lift up thanks for his sovereign power being unleashed in your life and pray for your eyes to see his presence with you today.

DAY 4

Read: Ephesians 1:13–14.

Reflect: In the ancient world, letters were closed with a seal. Hot wax was poured to close the letter and make it secure, and then a signet ring or stamp was pressed into the wax as it cooled. The imprint of the seal showed who it was from. It was like a signature on an email. When we placed our faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit of the living God fell on us, moved into us, and placed his seal on our heart. We are his. He watches over us. Every follower of Jesus bears this seal. It is one of the

things that unites us and makes us one. What are signs that the Holy Spirit of God has moved into your life and marked your heart with his presence?

Journal:

- When you first placed your faith in Jesus, how did you experience the Holy Spirit of God moving into your life and placing a seal on your heart?
- What inheritance have you already received from God? What are you promised to receive when you see him face to face one day?

Pray: Thank the Father for sealing you with the Holy Spirit and ask for the power of the Spirit to help you live each day for the praise of God's glory.

DAY 5

Read: Ephesians 1:15–18.

Reflect: When we know we are adopted, loved, and sealed by the Spirit of God, it should move us to pray with fresh vigor for

other believers. This is what the apostle Paul did. He could not stop giving thanks for God's people in the church at Ephesus. They were in his heart, on his lips, and lifted up. He could not stop praying for them! How should we pray for the beautiful and diverse family of God? What does the apostle Paul model in his joy-filled prayer?

Journal:

- What specific prayers does Paul lift up in Ephesians 1:16–18? How can you make these prayers your prayer as you lift up other Christians you know?
- How can you make each of the prayers modeled by Paul a universal prayer for all Christians around the world?

Pray: Pray for believers around the world to know the riches of God's glorious inheritance. Pray that they will recognize one of these great gifts is the spiritual reality that the diverse people of God are one united family.

DAY 6

Read: Ephesians 1:19–23.

Reflect: Let the truth of this passage sink into your soul. The mighty power of God that raised Jesus from the dead and conquered sin and hell is in you! Jesus rules and reigns over the entire universe and over your life. He rules through all history and for eternity. He is the head over all things for the sake of his Church, the family of God. Where do you tend to look for strength and energy when you feel depleted? What does this passage say about God's power?

Journal:

- What situations sap your energy? What are ways you can look to Jesus, rely on your Savior, and draw strength from his endless reserve of heavenly power?
- One of the ways God empowers us is through the community of his diverse and global family. Who are people in the church who bring you encouragement? How can you connect with them in ways that will empower you and them?

Pray: Praise God for the power he has to rule and reign over all things. Ask him to fill you with the strength you need in any areas you are feeling empty and in need of divine strength.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Ephesians 1:3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Now try to say the verse completely from memory.

Reflect: The source of the spiritual blessings that God lavishes on us is found in Jesus. As we walk with him, grow in faith, love him more, and share his good news with others, we experience his blessings. What are ways you can go deeper in your relationship with Jesus in the coming week? How can you make time to sit at his feet, reflect on his Word, and share his love? As you are in Christ, you experience the spiritual blessings he has prepared for you.



40 DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO

SIX SESSIONS

COLOSSIANS

ONE JESUS, ONE PEOPLE

JAY Y. KIM

4⏮ DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

COLOSSIANS

ONE JESUS, ONE PEOPLE

STUDY GUIDE | 6 SESSIONS

JAY Y. KIM

WITH KEVIN AND SHERRY HARNEY



HarperChristian
Resources

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INTRODUCTION

COLOSSIANS

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

Some of the apostle Paul's letters were written to believers who lived in cultural centers like Rome, Thessalonica, and Ephesus. The letter to the Colossians was different. It was sent to the southeast region of what is now known as Turkey. This was *not* a major trade center. It was *not* a hub of culture. The Colossian Christians lived in a place of moderate importance. It was a town much like where most people live around the world today. Jews and Gentiles lived side by side. There was ethnic and religious diversity. Judaism, Christianity, local religions and emperor worship each offered their own unique sets of values and beliefs. Sometime between 60 and 62 AD, the apostle Paul wrote to these early Christians who found themselves floundering amidst the muddled mishmash of religious syncretism. The simple message of the gospel of Jesus had become contaminated with injections of cultural beliefs and false religions. Paul wrote to remind them there is just one Jesus and one Church.

THE BIG PICTURE

In the first century, polytheism was the norm. There were many religions and countless expressions of faith. Temples built for a vast variety of gods dotted the landscape of almost every city and small town. One time, when the apostle Paul was in the city of Athens, he noticed all the places of worship. There was even an altar with the inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23). These people were so attentive to the pantheon of false gods that they made a place for any god they had missed or forgotten. Paul used this as a chance to point them to Jesus, Emmanuel, the one true God who came to live among us.

The book of Colossians, made up of just four short chapters, is massive when it comes to powerful teaching on the person of Jesus. Colossians 1:15–20 is one of the most concise and pointed declarations of the uniqueness of Jesus and divinity of our Lord in all the Bible. There is just one Jesus and when we know who he is, we have clear direction for our beliefs and life. If we water down the person of Jesus or add false religious or cultural beliefs, he is no longer the one Jesus. Paul was writing to correct the heretical teaching that was swirling around the church in Colossae.

Another massive challenge that existed in the first century was division among people. Like at all times in history, and in every part of the world, people can be divided because of ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and a massive list of other things. The apostle Paul is addressing this problem among the Colossian believers. The world might be divided over these things, but Christians should not be. When Jesus is at the

center of our hearts, lives, homes, churches, and community life, we are made one. Believers can say with bold confidence, “We are one people,” even when we have diverse backgrounds and differing views.

Paul’s central message to the Colossian believers is that we worship one Jesus and are part of one people (the Church). He goes on to expound this reality by presenting clear beliefs and theology in the first two chapters. It is right thinking that moves us toward Jesus and each other. In chapters three and four Paul turns our attention to right living that grows out of our beliefs. When we live according to the teachings and ways of Jesus, the world will see that we worship one Jesus as a unified people of God.

EPIC THEMES

There are many themes in Colossians that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

- **There is power in prayer.** Believers pray for each other with thankful hearts. We show our unity as we ask God to help other Christians know God, live for him, bear fruit, live in power, and walk in joy (see Colossians 1:1–14).
- **There is one Jesus, and he is the true center.** The world might bow and worship idols, emperors, and false gods, but Jesus alone is Lord and worthy of praise (see Colossians 1:15–23).

- **Jesus sets us free from the bondage of legalism and human traditions.** The world and religious traditionalism can lead to bondage and emptiness. Jesus comes to give us roots and strengthen us so that we are not lured into false religion (see Colossians 1:21–2:15).
- **Reality is not found in religion but in a relationship with Jesus and his people.** There is a tendency to grasp for straws and shadows. Jesus is real, solid, and the rock on which we build our faith and life. Christians find their reality in Jesus alone and reject cheap imitations (see Colossians 2:16–23).
- **There is a battle we all face.** The enticements of sin invite us all to wander from Jesus and embrace the glittery and attractive things of the world. The resurrection of Jesus and his presence with us should move us from the things of the world and right into the arms of our Savior, over and over again (see Colossians 3:1–11).
- **God offers new “clothes.”** When we come to faith in Jesus, we are called to put off our old ways, attitudes, actions . . . the clothes of the past. At the same time, we are moved to dress ourselves in the things of Jesus . . . a whole new lifestyle that fits who we are as children of God (see Colossians 3:12–4:1).
- **We share the mystery of Christ.** When we learn there is one Jesus and stand united as one people, we are moved

to proclaim this life-transforming mystery of the gospel to all who will listen (see Colossians 4:2–18).

The world has always been divided. Conflict seems to be hard-wired into the broken hearts and minds of sinful human beings. In Christ we find unity in the one Jesus who rules and reigns over our hearts, the Church, and the world. As Christians live in unity as one people, we set an example for the world. Peace is possible. Conflict does not have to go on endlessly. God's people can love each other even when we face the same things that seem to divide people in our world. What an opportunity to show the world that unity is possible for those who know, love, and follow Jesus!

THE TRUE CENTER

COLOSSIANS 1:1-29

There is a human tendency to place ourselves at the center of our own little universe. With piercingly beautiful words and Spirit-inspired clarity, the apostle Paul declares that there is only one center around which a faithful Christian can orbit and not have life spin out of control. Jesus, the divine One, is our center.

WELCOME

Big, bold, brash claims! We have all heard them. Muhammad Ali, the great boxer known for his success in the ring and his equally effective verbal jabs outside the ring declared things like, “I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee!” He also claimed to be, “The greatest of all time!”

Decades later another sports story has been unfolding as people debate who is the best basketball player in history. Should the title go to Michael “Air” Jordan or LeBron “King” James? Who is the greatest basketball player to ever grace the courts of the NBA? Lots of people have claimed that LeBron James is the G.O.A.T! And lots of other people are equally sure that Michael Jordan is the **Greatest Of All Time!** The battle and debate rages on.

In the days of Jesus and the early Church, there was a procession of Roman emperors who claimed to be the divine center of the empire. One by one, they passed from this life and into history. Over time, it was clear that their claims were radically overstated and anyone who made these human leaders the center of their life had missed the mark.

More than 2,000 years ago, an itinerant rabbi with no home, no political influence, and no formal religious organization claimed to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6). On one occasion, this wandering teacher invoked the divine name of God when he spoke to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3:14; John 8:58). The religious leaders of the day were so convinced that Jesus was claiming to be God, and the single way to eternal life with the Father, they had him nailed to a Roman cross. They delighted as his blood poured to the ground and his life was snuffed out after only thirty-three years walking on this earth. When Jesus declared he was the divine center of all things, he made the boldest claim in the history of the world.

For more than 2,000 years his followers have worshiped Jesus as their Lord and sought to place him at the center

of their lives, homes, churches, and even their culture. Two millennia after the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, more than 2.3 billion people practice some form of faith based on the teaching and life of this one man.

Though persecution of Christians continues and even grows in many parts of the world, Jesus is still Lord of all. Although secular philosophies blossom and thrive, Jesus is risen, alive, and invites every person to receive his grace and leadership.

The question is not, “Is Jesus the true center of all things?” He is!

The real question is, “Will I let him be the center of my life today and every day?”

SHARE

Tell about a time on your journey with Jesus when he was at the center of your attention, heart, and life. How did this impact the way you lived, loved, and labored in that season?

WATCH

Watch the video segment for session one. (Play the DVD or see the instructions on the inside front cover on how to access the sessions through streaming.) As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

COLOSSIANS

What is at the center?

Who is at the center? (John 14:6)?

The context and setting of Colossians (Colossians 1:1–5)

Syncretism and false teaching in the Church. . . . then and now
(Colossians 1:5; Philippians 3:20)

The primary reason for the letter to the Colossian church . . .
course correction

The danger of *materialism*

THE TRUE CENTER

The seduction of *individualism*

The lure of *nationalism*

Who is at the center—me or Jesus? (Colossians 1:15–20)

Was Jesus . . .

Deceived?

Deluded?

Divine?

COLOSSIANS

The importance and role of the firstborn in the ancient world
(Colossians 1:15)

Opening our eyes to recognize the temptation of syncretism
and fixing our eyes on Jesus, the true center of it all!

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched and explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Jay's teaching?

2. The church in Colossae was facing the temptation to embrace syncretistic beliefs and practices. They were enticed to combine the current cultural and religious beliefs, values, and practices with their Christian faith. How are Christians today facing the temptation to fuse *one* of these “isms” with their faith in Jesus?
 - Materialism
 - Individualism
 - Nationalism
 - Some other “ism”

3. **Read Colossians 1:3–6.** The apostle Paul emphasizes “the true message of the gospel.” When you let any “ism,” belief system, or personal preference influence your faith in Jesus, things become murky and diluted, and your faith gets watered down. Describe a time you saw this happen in your life or the faith journey or someone you know. Why is this so dangerous that the apostle Paul warns you about it?

4. **Read Colossians 1:15–20.** Make a list of the things this passage declares about Jesus. What are the implications for the Church and your life of faith if each one is true?

5. When you understand that Jesus is the firstborn and live with him as your true center (both in community with God's people and in your individual faith journey), what impact can this have on one of the areas below?
- How you deal with the enticement to sin and wander from God's care
 - How you relate to other followers of Jesus in your church and community
 - When you face times of darkness and pain
 - How you relate to people who are far from Jesus or antagonistic to your faith
 - How you care for and relate to members of your family
 - Some other area or aspect of your life
6. What is a specific way you have learned to slow down and fix your eyes on Jesus in the busyness of life and the storms you face? How has this practice helped you keep Jesus in the center of your life?

MEMORIZE

At each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) from the passage covered in the video teaching to memorize. This week, your memory verses are from Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Have everyone recite these verses out loud. Then go around the room and ask for any volunteers who would like to say the verses from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is one practical next step you can take to fix your eyes on Jesus as the center of your life, community, and the world?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of the following directions:

- Praise, worship, and celebrate Jesus as the divine center of the universe, your church, and your life.
- Pray for churches, other believers, and yourself to recognize when syncretism is slipping into our thinking and practices. Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to resist this deceptive temptation.
- Confess where you have let any sort of “ism” or syncretistic thinking taint your purity of faith in Jesus alone. (You might want to do this as a group or make time for silent confession.)
- Lift up members of your group and pray that they will follow, worship, and live for Jesus as the true and only center of their life.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week, you will begin by reviewing the key verse(s) to memorize for the session. During the next five days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of Colossians, reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will review the theme of the session, reflect on what you have learned, and review how it has impacted your life.

DAY I

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

Reflect: All of the fulness of divinity dwells in Jesus. He is God with us. The center of all things. Jesus is in the reconciliation business. We know that he came to reconcile us to the Father through his sacrifice, but there is much more. Stop and ponder this truth: Jesus came to reconcile everything in heaven and on the earth to himself. Let that reality wash over your soul and fill your mind. What is Jesus presently healing, restoring, and reconciling in your life? What is he restoring and reconciling in the world around us? How can you rejoice in the reconciling work of Jesus?

DAY 2

Read: Colossians 1:1–2.

Reflect: The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to write to “brothers and sisters” in Christ in the city of Colossae. So often we read the Bible in isolation and filter it through our own mind, life, and immediate needs. There is no question that the Scriptures relate to each believer and that God wants to speak to you personally. But there is something bigger going on here. God is building a church made up of people from every tribe and nation. As you read the Bible, listen with ears and a heart as big as the vision of God. Our Savior came to offer himself for people from every walk of life. Read his Word with the whole human family in mind and you will receive fresh perspectives and vistas you have never seen before. How do I tend to read the Bible? Who do I think God is speaking to?

Journal:

- How can you expand your understanding of the Scriptures by reading (or listening) with a larger audience in mind?
- How might your life change if you learned from the Scriptures in a community (like your small group and in church services) and let the presence and insights of other people help shape your faith in Jesus?

Pray: Pray for your group members by name and ask God to grow each of them as they open God's Word and learn from the teaching of the Bible.

DAY 3

Read: Colossians 1:3-8.

Reflect: Praying for God's people is a central theme in the Bible. In this passage we are captured by the heart and spirit of prayer. Paul and his ministry partners are "always thankful." What a beautiful picture! They have heard about the growing faith, the unquenchable hope, and expansive love of the Colossian Christians. These people are fruitful in sharing

the good news of Jesus and they live in the grace of God. Do you get a sense that Paul knows and loves these people (if even from a distance)? He and his companions are praying often with hearts filled with joy. Who do you pray for in your church and in other churches? What is your knowledge of the spiritual condition of these people? How can you pray with increasing passion and frequency?

Journal:

- How can you get to know the spiritual condition of other believers in greater depth?
- How can you increase your passion and engagement in praying for other Christians in your church and in other churches in the community where you live?

Pray: Think about two or three other churches in your community that worship and follow Jesus as the Lord of the universe and center of their congregation. Pray for these churches with a thankful heart, asking for God to grow their faith, hope, and love.

DAY 4

Read: Colossians 1:9–14.

Reflect: In Colossians 1:3–8 we are captured by the spirit and heart of Paul's prayer for the church. In this passage we are stunned by the powerful content of his prayer. Reflect on what the apostle and his ministry colleagues are praying for these believers and learn from their example. They are praying for:

- Knowledge of God's will . . .
- Power to live a life worthy of the Lord . . .
- Strength to live in ways that please God . . .
- To bear fruit in all they do . . .
- Growth in the knowledge of God . . .
- The believers to be strengthened and empowered . . .
- To live with great endurance and patience . . .
- The Colossian Christians to share in the inheritance of God's people . . .

If you have ever been praying for another believer and wondered what to lift up to heaven on their behalf, Colossians 1:9–14 is a great place to start. What do you learn about the content of prayer for other Christians in this passage?

Journal:

- Write down the names of three Christians you love and care about. How could you pray the content of this prayer for each one of these people?
- What might happen if you begin praying the content of this passage for yourself? What might God do in you as the power of heaven is unleashed?

Pray: Take time right now and pray each theme of this prayer for yourself and for one other Christian you love and care about.

DAY 5

Read: Colossians 1:15–20.

Reflect: This passage expresses, with laser-like precision, the person of Jesus. You could spend an hour reflecting on this passage every day for a year and still not comprehend the greatness of the sovereign Lord of the universe. The closing words point us to a hill called “the skull” and to a Savior whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out for our

salvation. The pinnacle of this passage points not to heaven but to a place on this planet where the divine One bore the shame that broken and rebellious people deserved. From the stench of a stable to the torture of Roman execution, the life of Jesus was marked by sacrifice. Our reconciliation was bought at an infinite price as the center of the universe moved into our space, time, and skin. This rich passage focuses on Jesus, the Lord of glory. Why do you think it begins with Jesus' power, creation, glory, sovereignty, and supremacy but ends with sacrifice, blood, and a cross?

Journal:

- What do you learn about Jesus in this passage?
- What does each thing you learn about Jesus teach you about yourself?

Pray: Take this passage and personalize it into a prayer lifted up directly to Jesus. Jesus, you are the Son of God, the perfect image of the God I can't see. You are the firstborn of all creation. . . .

DAY 6

Read: Colossians 1:21–29.

Reflect: When we recognize the magnitude of and reason for Jesus' suffering, we hear the Spirit of God invite us to join him on this journey of sacrifice. Paul actually tells the Colossian believers that he rejoices that he is able to suffer in his service to the Church, including their congregation. For the sake of God's people, the body of Christ, Paul is willing to bear physical pain in his own body. What a picture! What a declaration! Paul has been transformed from a powerful and aggressive persecutor of the Church to a humble servant who is honored to suffer for God's people. When Paul sees the hope of the glory of Jesus come alive in other people, both Jewish and Gentile, he is willing to pay any price. This is one picture of what it means to become like the Savior. What are you willing to sacrifice and give up for the sake of Jesus and to help others come and receive the hope of glory?

Journal:

- Reflect on people who sacrificed and even suffered to share the truth and grace of Jesus with you. What could you do to honor, thank, or encourage these people?

- What are one or two ways you could count the cost, sacrifice, or suffer for the sake of following Jesus?

Pray: Thank Jesus for the people who willingly and gladly sacrificed so that you could come to know Jesus, the hope of glory. Pray that you will have this kind of impact on the lives of many others.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting Colossians 1:19–20:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Now try to say these verses completely from memory.

Reflect: Peace through sacrifice. Jesus came to heal our relationship with the Father in heaven and to allow us to love each other and live for him. This peace comes through his life, death, and resurrection. It was sealed by his blood shed for us. How has the finished work of Jesus on the cross brought peace in your life, relationships, and with God? Is there a relationship where you are not living in peace? How can you bring this to Jesus and ask for his completed work to empower you to seek restoration, reconciliation, or peace in this relationship?



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40 Days Through the Book: John

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN

AUTHOR, DATE, AND LOCATION

During his years of ministry, Jesus spoke to the masses, sent out the Seventy, and called the Twelve, but he also had an inner circle of three disciples: Peter, James, and John. The author of this Gospel is one of them. John, the beloved disciple, was one of the Savior's dearest friends and partners in ministry. He was the one sitting closest to Jesus at the Last Supper (see John 13:23) and the one Jesus asked to watch over his mother, Mary, as he was dying on the cross (see 19:26–27). Most scholars believe this Gospel was written around AD 85–90, which would make it the final biblical account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This account is filled with passion and Jesus' rich theology. If you want to learn what Jesus said about himself, dig deep into the Gospel of John.

THE BIG PICTURE

Sometimes a movie, story, or book can be confusing. We get to the end and have no idea what the point really was. We scratch our heads and wonder, *What was the message?*

When we read the John's Gospel from beginning to end, the purpose of this Holy Spirit-breathed record of the life of Jesus becomes crystal clear. John, the author of this beautiful account of the Messiah's coming, life, death, and resurrection, sums up his intentions so we can't possibly get the wrong idea. Here is the big picture of John's telling of the Jesus story in his own words:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
(John 20:30–31)

John's Gospel is meant to help people believe that Jesus is exactly who he said he was: the Messiah, the Son of God. John was selective in what accounts he recorded. If he had tried to write down everything that Jesus said and did, his Gospel could have been longer than the Bible itself. Instead, led by the Holy Spirit, John recorded specific signs, teachings, and accounts with the express purpose of helping people truly believe in Jesus.

Then John took things one huge step further. He let the readers of his Gospel (including you and me) know that what we believe about Jesus will transform our lives. When we sincerely believe in the Savior, we have life in his name—not just an ordinary life, but the fullest life possible (see John 10:10).

The purpose of John's Gospel is no mystery. God desires each of us to believe in Jesus and embrace the truth of who he is. Our Creator is delighted when our belief in Jesus transforms our lives. As you begin this forty-day journey through the book of John, pause and pray that your belief will deepen and your life will be transformed by the Word of the living God.

EPIC THEMES

There are many themes in the Gospel of John that are worthy of our focus. Some of these include:

Why Jesus came. Jesus came so that we could believe in him—really believe! Faith in Jesus is the most important thing for any Christian. John could have included many other things about Jesus' life in his Gospel, but he was led by the Spirit to include the things he did so that his readers would believe in Jesus as the Messiah and that by believing would receive the eternal life that God offers to all (see John 20:30–31).

Who Jesus is. If you studied the book of John and highlighted every name for Jesus (that he used of himself, the Father attributed to him, or others used for him), you would get great insight into who our Savior is. In John we find the seven “I am” statements Jesus made of himself. One of the central themes of this Gospel is understanding exactly who Jesus is:

- the Bread of Life (see 6:35, 41, 48, 51)
- the Light of the World (see 8:12)
- the Gate for the sheep (see 10:7–9)
- the Resurrection and the Life (see 11:25)
- the Good Shepherd (see 10:11, 14)

The sacrifice, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The epic conclusion of John's Gospel is the crucifixion, burial, victorious resurrection, and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. This portion of the Gospel reveals that all believers can put their faith in Jesus and that what Jesus promised is absolutely true (see John 19–21).

In a world of doubting and skepticism, Jesus came to help us believe in what matters most—him! When we truly believe in Jesus, he offers us life. In the Savior, we find the meaning of life, abundant life and eternal life. This study of the story of Jesus is meant to do exactly what John said two thousand years ago—help you encounter the Messiah and find life (of every good kind) in his name.



SESSION ONE

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

JOHN 1

What we believe impacts every aspect of our lives.

When God entered human history and the Word became flesh, the power of heaven was unleashed on the earth. God became a man. People could see and believe in him in a whole new way. It is time to ask the question, "What do I really believe about Jesus, and how should this shape my daily life?"

WELCOME

Our lives will be shaped and dramatically impacted by what we believe and where we put our trust. Jesus offers a rock-solid foundation for life. Sadly, many people look to the things of this world and hope they will provide the security and stability their souls long for. Too often the results are tragic.

Countless people have lost their life's savings by getting sucked into an investment scam or Ponzi scheme. They put all the money they have saved into an opportunity that seems too good to be true—because it is! When the truth finally comes out, their retirement savings are gone and there is often nothing they can do to recover their resources.

Many young people have a sense of invincibility. They place their trust in their own strength, abilities, and creativity. Over time the weight of life becomes too much and something has to give. Their blind confidence becomes flooded by uncertainty.

Your soulmate is out there! Just find the right one! So many people spend their lives looking for the perfect person who will “complete them” and make life wonderful. Many never find that elusive prize. Those who do, with time, tend to discover one of two things. That person is not as perfect as they imagined (and sometimes they start looking again). Or the weight and expectations they heap on that one “flawless person” is too much and it crushes them.

If we place our ultimate belief and trust in finances, health, people, or anything else, in time we will end up disappointed, and the sheer weight of life will bring things crumbling down. In the beginning of John's Gospel, we are offered a place to put out trust, belief, hope, and life. Well, it's not really a place; it's a person. He is the Word of God. The Light. The Messiah. Jesus.

SHARE

Tell about a time when you put your hope, trust, or belief in something (or someone), and things did not turn out well.

WATCH

Play the video for session one. (Play the DVD or see the instructions on the inside front cover on how to access the sessions through streaming.) As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts, questions, or key points that stand out to you.

The big picture—snapshots of the four Gospels:

- Matthew:
- Mark:
- Luke:
- John:

The focal point of John's Gospel and his big themes:

Jesus the Logos (John 1:1)

- Greek meaning:

- Jewish meaning:

JOHN

The Word became flesh (John 1:14–18).

What do you really believe?

What do you believe about Jesus?

The number seven in Scripture

The importance of real, growing, and increasing belief in Jesus

Our lives and prayers tell the story of what we believe about everything, including Jesus.

DISCUSS

Take a few minutes to discuss with your group members what you just watched and to explore these concepts in Scripture. Use the following questions to help guide your discussion.

1. What impacted you the most as you watched Kyle's teaching on John 1?

2. **Read John 20:30–31.** Kyle told a story about his son using a walker after an injury. What are some of the "walkers" people use to help them get through life, move forward, and bear the weight that life can heap on them? How has true belief in Jesus helped you (or someone close to you) stand strong and press forward through the hard times of life?

3. **Read John 1:1–5.** This power-packed passage launches us into John's Gospel. Jesus is the "Word." What do we learn about our Savior? how should this impact our belief in him?
4. **Read John 1:14–18.** What do you learn about Jesus (the Word) from this passage? How have you experienced both the grace and truth of Jesus as your belief in him has deepened over time?
5. Our core beliefs shape our attitudes, govern our emotional world, guide our behavior, regulate our relationships, and form our future. Take a moment and write down two or three things that you believe about Jesus at the core of your being. Share one of these beliefs with your group and illustrate how this belief impacts how you walk through life.
6. What are ways we can be sure we are growing to really believe in Jesus and not just gather information about him? How can we help the next generation encounter Jesus so they truly believe in him?

MEMORIZE

In each session, you will be given a key verse (or verses) to memorize from the passage covered in the video teaching. This week your memory verse is John 1:1:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

Recite this verse out loud. Ask for volunteers who would like to say the verse from memory.

RESPOND

What will you take away from this session? What is one practical next step you can take that will deepen your belief in Jesus and impact your life in a positive way that honors God?

PRAY

Close your group time by praying in any of these directions:

- Lift up prayers of thanks and praise for how Jesus has been the one to strengthen and protect you in the hard times of life.
- Praise God for who Jesus is and for how his presence and power in your life have transformed your past and your present.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to grow your faith in Jesus over the coming forty days, and pray for the members of your group to go deeper in their belief in Jesus.

YOUR 40-DAY JOURNEY

SESSION ONE

Reflect on the material you have covered in this session by engaging in the following between-session learning resources. Each week you will begin by reviewing the key verse(s) to memorize for the session. During the next six days, you will have an opportunity to read a portion of John's Gospel and reflect on what you learn, respond by taking action, journal some of your insights, and pray about what God has taught you. Finally, on the last day, you will review the key verse(s) and reflect on what you have learned for the week.

DAY 1

Memorize: Begin this week's personal study by reciting the following verse found in John 1:1:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

Now try to say the verse from memory.

Reflect: The opening chapter of John's Gospel is the Christmas story from very a unique perspective. Matthew records the journey of magi (wise men) coming to Bethlehem with gifts for the newborn King. Luke tells about the encounter the shepherds had with angels in a field at night and their pilgrimage to see Mary, Joseph, and the baby in a manger. But in John's Gospel, we meet the Word of God who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). That is his version of the Christmas story. Reflect on the meaning and message that John brings to the incarnation—the coming of God into space and time. Think about John's unique contribution to the story of Jesus entering into our world and lives.

DAY 2

Read: John 1:1–18

Reflect: Grace and truth, that's how Jesus came! As John tells his Christmas story, he is emphatic that Jesus entered our world with overflowing grace and truth (see verse 14). This balance is essential and can be seen in Jesus all through John's Gospel. Grace with no truth can become sentimental pablum with no foundations or boundaries for life. Truth with no grace becomes inflexible dogmatism when doctrine is emphasized but kindness is nowhere to be seen. Grace and truth together can change that world, and that's what Jesus came to do. We should all ask ourselves, *Do I live with a healthy balance of grace and truth?*

Journal:

- What are some of the truths that Jesus spoke and lived that you need to develop more fully in your life?
- Where do you need to develop grace in your heart and extend it to others as you walk through life? How has Jesus been an example to you in these areas?

Pray: Thank Jesus for the grace he has shown to you throughout your life. Pray for a heart that is growing in his grace. Ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to help you show and share grace everywhere you go.

DAY 3

Read: John 1:19–42 and 3:22–36

Reflect: Humility is in short supply in our world. The story of John the Baptist awakens our souls to the beauty and power of a humble heart and life. When the Jewish leaders, a powerful group of influencers, asked John if he was someone of great religious significance (the Messiah, the prophet, or Elijah), he gave an honest and simple no. He then went on to explain that his role was to point to the Messiah, lift him up, and help people see him. This was not a case of self-hatred or poor self-esteem; it was the pure truth. John came as a messenger. He was a signpost

firmly placed in the dirt of this world, pointing “This way to Jesus!” This was enough for John. He delighted in the privilege. How is humility growing in your life today?

Journal:

- What are signs and indicators that you are increasing in pride and becoming absorbed in your glory instead of focusing on Jesus?
- What are specific steps you can take to become humbler in heart and actions?

Pray: Ask the Spirit of God to open your eyes to ways that pride might be growing in your heart and life. Confess these to God and ask for power to repent and turn from pride. Ask for Jesus to help you walk in humility as you do all you can to put him first and point others to the Savior and not yourself.

DAY 4

Read: John 1:43–51

Reflect: Jesus saw you long before you recognized and followed him. In Nathanael’s story, we meet a man who was amazed that Jesus saw him and knew him even before they met. The closer

we follow the Savior and the more we learn about the God who made us, the less surprised we will be at his sovereign work in our lives. God knows everything about us yet still loves us. In the depths of our sin and rebellion, Jesus knew us and was willing to die in our place for our sins. We should never be shocked at how much God knows about us, for he is omniscient (he knows all things) and nothing escapes his view. What should amaze us is that God loves us and lavishes us with his grace even when he knows our whole stories! Do you know that you have absolutely no secrets from God?

Journal:

- God knows *everything* about you. What are some of the implications when we realize we have no secrets from God?
- How does God's omniscience (ability to know all things) deepen your faith and shape what you believe about Jesus?

Pray: Praise God for his sovereign power and omniscient glory. Thank him for knowing everything about you yet still loving you and offering you cleansing through Jesus. Pray for a daily awareness that God's loving eyes never wander from you and his presence never leaves you.

DAY 5

Read: John 2:1–12

Reflect: Jesus’ turning water into wine was the first of his seven signs (recorded in John’s Gospel) that revealed who he was and helped people believe in him. You might wonder, *How in the world does making wine—really good wine—help people believe in Jesus?* The point is not found in the wine but in the meaning behind this miracle. Of course it is impressive and a disruption of the normal biological process for someone to change water into wine, but more is happening. When the master of the banquet said, “But you have saved the best till now” (verse 10), he was getting to the heart of the miracle. Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament messianic prophecies. He was the better and perfected version of all that had come before (in the book of Hebrews this comes up over and over). He would be the final sacrifice as well as the perfect High Priest, and he would do what no one or nothing before him could. When you see Jesus and believe in him, you learn that the best was saved for last!

Journal:

- How has Jesus satisfied you and filled you with what your heart and life longed for?
- What are some of the possible consequences and dangers of looking to other things or people to give you meaning and satisfaction in life?

Pray: Thank your heavenly Father for sending Jesus, his beloved Son, as the final sacrifice and full payment for all of your sins. Give praise to Jesus for his miracle-working power in ancient times and in your life today. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you notice all the ways Jesus is still the best of all you need in this world and for eternity.

DAY 6

Read: John 3:1–21

Reflect: We all have our own unique and Spirit-led journey to Jesus. For Nicodemus, one of the most powerful and influential religious leaders in his community, his search for Jesus began in the dark. He was spiritually blind, which is an odd thing to say about a religious elite. He also came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. He came at night because he did not want others in his community to recognize that he was seeking to learn from Jesus. But as Nicodemus talked with Jesus, listened, and entered into some rabbinical argumentation, the light of Jesus began to break through. With time, Nicodemus placed his belief in Jesus and was transformed. What was your journey to Jesus? How did he meet you where you were and lead you to faith in his name?

Journal:

- What have you learned about Jesus in his interaction with Nicodemus, and how does this connect with your journey to the Savior?

- How was Nicodemus's path to faith unique, and what are some of the distinctive aspects of your own faith journey?

Pray: Thank God for the unique ways he has drawn your heart to the Lord. Pray for people you love who are not yet Jesus followers, asking God to meet them where they are and draw them to himself. Praise God that he is willing to meet us in the day or the night, in times of joy or sorrow.

DAY 7

Memorize: Conclude this week's personal study by again reciting John 1:1:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*

Now try to say the verse from memory.

Reflect: Jesus was divine! He was not just a great teacher. He was more than a gifted and popular rabbi. He was a miracle worker, but this was not the whole story. Jesus was infinity wrapped in human flesh. Divinity in diapers. God with us. Why must the tenet that Jesus was fully divine be central to our belief? Take time to reflect on Jesus' divine attributes and thank him for accomplishing for us what we could never do on our own.

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